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**THE AIDS QUILT RETURNS
TO WASHINGTON—COURTESY
OF CORPORATE FUNDING**

By Mark Schoofs

the vast AIDS memorial quilt, laid out this week-end in the nation's capital and bearing the names of 70,000 people felled by the virus, had an official credit card: American Express. It also had an official airline, United. Microsoft and pharmaceutical giants Glaxo-Welcome and Smith-Kline Beecham helped underwrite Saturday's candle-light march. And next to the quilt stood a "wellness tent," where several drug companies provided "patient information." "It's an atrocity," fumed Sally Cooper of the PWA Health Group. "You don't sell drugs at a graveyard."



What's in a Quilt?

At 1,382,400 square feet, the Quilt is currently as large as 24 football fields. It has 40,000 panels commemorating 70,000 people. Among the objects commonly sewn into these panels are love letters, stars, rainbows, hearts, teddy bears, cremation ashes (sewn into pouches), human hair, jockstraps, and cock rings.

The Quilt has been displayed five times in its entirety, always in Washington D.C. It was first shown in October 1987, during the National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

Top 10 Donors:

- American Express Foundation: **\$100,000**
- National Endowment for the Arts: **\$100,000**

- Roche Laboratories: **\$50,000** (donation plus wellness tent sponsorship)
- Levi Strauss Foundation: **\$50,000**
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- The Steve Silver Foundation: **\$10,000**

Compiled by Richard Kornylak, Carlos Riobo, and Carla Spartos

From its first unfurling nine years ago, when it was one-twentieth its current size, the Quilt has incited controversy: not political enough, too mawkish, a diversion of money and energy from more-direct activism. This year, the wellness tent caught most of the ire, perhaps because many activists believe pharmaceutical companies are profiteering on AIDS.

The tent's sponsor, Stadtlanders Pharmacy, pointed out that community organizations as well as drug companies operated booths. It's a "health fair," insisted Lisa Fischetti, Stadtlanders vice president of sales and marketing, not a "display of commercialism." Well, maybe, but it's hard to imagine a marketing tie-in with Arlington.

The plain truth is that the Quilt's organizers needed money. The 44-ton memorial had to be transported from San Francisco to Washington. Twelve thousand volunteers had to be mobilized. Forty thousand individual panels had to be preserved, repaired, catalogued, and maneuvered into the exact right spot so that people could locate their loved ones in an area the size of 24 football fields.

That's my son's panel," says Maria Dominguez, pointing to a block of blue cloth decorated with suspenders, bow ties, and the name Robert Jack Dominguez, 1956-1991. "And right next to him," she says, pointing again, "is his friend Bob Ponte."

Maria Dominguez is sitting on a narrow strip of lawn near the middle of the Quilt. It's late in the warm afternoon, and other people are also resting here: Two men are napping, arm in arm; a mother is playing with her baby in a stroller. Dominguez is alone. Her sister, who lives in Washington and took care of Robert when he was ill, isn't feeling well. Her other son wanted to come, but like Robert he has AIDS and is too sick. Still, this 71-year-old mother had a special reason to make the trip from her



Working the Quilt.
Critics complain that
it is sentimental,
but so is love.

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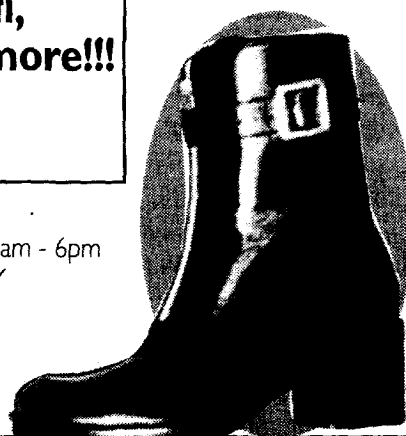
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home in New York: Today is Robert's birthday. "He would have been 41," she says.

Brian Chamberlain died five days before his 11th birthday. His panel shows a photograph of a big-eyed, big-eyed kid beneath the faces of his four favorite cartoon characters: The inscription reads, "the bravest Ninja Turtle of them all."

Critics complain that the Quilt is sentimental. It is, but so is grief. Anything but artful, grief is messy and maudlin, even embarrassing. With more teddy bears than FAO Schwarz, and more promises to "rage against the dying of the light" than a Hallmark card rack, the Quilt bares all this. But that's part of its power. It's as real as the people who make it.

Many panels commemorate more than one person: employees of companies such as TWA, Pac Bell, or this newspaper; gay choruses; HIV support groups; or simply someone's circle of friends. Some of these quilts-within-the-quilt are terrifying. The panel for New York's Lesbian and Gay Community Center is made up of small squares, each embroidered beautifully but plainly with a single name. There are 510 names.

The Community Center's quilt "is actually quite old," says executive director Richard Burns. "It was made four years ago."

Four years ago, 185,000 Americans had died of AIDS. Now, more than 325,000 have perished. Another American dies every 11 minutes; another gets infected every 13 minutes.

New drugs have given hope and even health to many, including Quilt founder Cleve Jones. But for others, the drugs have failed outright or worked for only a short time. And of course, they are wildly expensive for the Third World, where 90 per cent of all people with HIV live.

From atop the Washington Monument, the whole quilt can be seen, stretching for a mile toward the Capitol. At the near end, one can distinguish the outline of individual panels. But as the eye travels up the Mall, the Quilt becomes a whitish blur, and the people walking and grieving among it dwindle to black dots. This is the photograph that will be reproduced in countless magazines and posters. But from this vantage point, the Quilt is no longer personal. It becomes a spectacular statistic.

The Quilt has always been political, but this year it was more overtly so. Sections of the Quilt were dispatched across the nation to mobilize a voter-registration drive: The slogan was "Remember them with your vote." Thousands of people milled through the Quilt this weekend wearing buttons that read,

"I'm voting in memory of," and they would fill in the blank with a name. Meanwhile, protestors formed a human chain around the Capitol, marched on the pharmaceutical industry's lobbying headquarters, and dumped the ashes of their loved ones on the White House lawn.

Of course, none of this would be necessary if America were not still ambivalent about AIDS. Can one imagine having to drum up sympathy for victims of polio, or to whip up urgency for a cure or vaccine? But 15 years into this epidemic, America is still not trying its hardest to keep people from ending up in the Quilt. Major television networks still do not air condom ads, and many AIDS education posters still waste precious dollars on vague and useless slogans such as "Learn the facts" or "Protect yourself" instead of giving specific, frank advice.

And the AIDS magazine POZ recently revealed that the Clinton administration was poised to launch a national needle-exchange program in 1994. The Department of Health and Human Services had even drafted a press release. But then the Republicans swept Congress and the administration backed off.

At a reception cosponsored by the Quilt, HHS secretary Donna Shalala shifted the blame, telling the *Voice* that Congress has barred the president from implementing a national program unless needle exchange is proven to "reduce" drug use. In fact, Congress has merely stipulated that such programs must "not encourage" drug use. Research overwhelmingly proves they don't, and this very weekend, a major study from New York added still more evidence that needle exchange works. Meanwhile, two-thirds of this country's HIV infections are now occurring in drug users, their sex partners, or their children.

Citing logistics and cost, many believe the Quilt will never again be shown in its entirety. But that same prediction has been made before. In fact, the Quilt may have a better chance of being shown again, now that it has proven its marketing mettle. But the Quilt will always be more than the sum of its sponsors.

The panel for Mike Hippler features a tree with cloth handprints for leaves. Some of the handprints are small—his nieces and nephews. One is in the shape of hands praying, another in the shape of a fist. As I gaze, a gust of wind blows into this section of the Quilt, lifting it up and folding it over. I lay it back and smooth it out very carefully, because one of the handprints on this panel belongs to me.

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Research assistance: TRACY SYERS

The Other Memorial

As the AIDS Quilt was laid out on the Washington Mall, another memorial was being dedicated at the nearby Holocaust museum: a \$1.5 million fund to ensure that the history of homosexuals under the Nazis is remembered. At the ceremony, Gad Beck, an elfin former resistance fighter from Berlin, told the story of his "great and first love," Manfred.

It was the middle of the war, and Beck was 18. "One evening I go to visit him," he said in his slightly broken English, "but he was not home." Only Manfred's brother was there, and he told Beck that the Nazis had taken Manfred and the rest of his family to a camp.

In a panic, Beck went to a friend who had a son in the Gestapo, and got his uniform. It was too big, made for a man who stood well over six feet. But it was the only chance he had.

Beck marched into the transit camp, which was located in his old school. Wearing

the uniform and barking orders, he coned the soldiers—with their "faces like angels but no soul and no heart"—into giving him custody of Manfred. Not far from the school-turned-camp, "on the same street where I was once a boy playing," Beck gave his beloved 20 marks and a safe-house address.

But Manfred told Beck, "I cannot go." As long as his family was incarcerated, he said, "I cannot be free."

"And our love?" Beck asked him. "No," Manfred replied, "our love is not enough to make such a step." Manfred returned to his captors.

Beck, whose father was Jewish, spent the war helping Jews escape to Switzerland, often relying on his contacts in the gay world. He was betrayed and incarcerated just before Germany's surrender. Later, Beck discovered Manfred's fate in Nazi records. He had ended up in Auschwitz, where he perished along with the rest of his family.

—M.S.